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SUBJECT: LOOKING AHEAD TO ELECTIONS

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¶1. (SBU) The REO staff have been polling our Basrah contacts since September regarding the likelihood of provincial elections and possible outcomes. With few exceptions, REO contacts have overwhelmingly stated that election planning and candidate vetting is stalled until the new election law is passed and a new electoral commission comes into being. Many expressed frustration that the issue was not a higher priority in Baghdad, and a few believed there would be a "fix" in setting the dates in order to allow the current government the advantage in garnering support and votes. Members of the Basrah Provincial Council were clear that the biggest development would be whether the candidates ran as individuals or in blocs.

¶2. (U) At least one citizens' group, the Gathering to Save Basrah, has made it clear that it will support individuals, not parties, in the next election as incumbents have proved disappointing. (Note: The Gathering is made up of a cross-section of professionals, academics, clerics, and tribal members who restrict membership to those with no political affiliation. End note.) It is the only local group that post is aware of that plans to back specific candidates based on expertise and experience. Since the last elections in January 2005, Basrah has suffered a decrease in essential services while the crime rate has notably risen.

¶3. (U) Basrah's political powerhouses are affiliated with Shi'a politics and that is not expected to change. Guessing as to a likely outcome this early on is not advisable. However, if candidates are judged on an individuals basis and not by party bloc, then it is possible that blocs such as the United Iraqi Alliance will have competition for the majority of electoral seats. Fadhila Party, the governor's party, is still considered strong but there is public resentment over the party's inability to promote economic growth despite the province's oil and shipping wealth. We also expect that the Office of the Martyr Sadr party, (the political arm of Jai'sh al-Mahdi), will run candidates in the next election after boycotting the first.

¶4. (U) The local citizenry were active participants in the last election and are expected to be active once again. Poll violence was almost non-existent in the last elections, and voter turnout was high. The head of Basrah's Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq expects heavy voter participation in the next election as the main issues - essential services and security affect most of the households. Thus, if the elections are called with enough time to educate the population, and if candidates run as individuals not blocs, we expect turnout will be high for the next election.

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